The University of Chicago

TWO PHASES OF AMERICAN HUMOR

A PART OF
THE DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE
GRADUATE FACULTY IN CANDIDACY FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

BY
WALTER BLAIR

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BURLESQUES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN HUMOR

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BURLESQUES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN HUMOR[1]

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I

DURING recent years, several writers on American humor have pointed out the important fact that America's boisterous nineteenth-century literary comedians, writing honestly of the life about them, were significant pioneers in the development of realism in American fiction.[2] It has not, however, been made sufficiently clear that these humorists attacked the ruling romanticism in still another fashion—by magnifying its absurdities in a flood of burlesques and parodies which swept into print during the latter part of the century. The number and the methods of the attacks deserve consideration, for a study of the work of the parodists not only indicates the methods of the humorists but also adds a significant detail to the story of the beginnings of American realism.

Most of the major humorists employed burlesques frequently. The first book, for example, of George Horatio Derby, *Phoenixiana* (1855), had as its sub-title, *or Sketches and Burlesques,* and twelve of the thirty-three sections of the book were burlesques.[3] The proportion of burlesques in Derby's *Squibob Papers* was only slightly smaller. Artemus Ward wrote a series of burlesque novels, some published in *Vanity Fair,* nine of which are included in his complete works,[4] and two of which have been salvaged by Mr. Seitz;[5] and his

[1] Since no distinction was made between the burlesque and the parody by the humorists, it has seemed wise to follow the authors in using the terms synonymously.

[2] Professor Pattee hinted at the fact in *A History of American Literature since 1870* (New York: Century, 1915), p. 43. The point has been made more definitely in J. L. King's *Doctor George William Bagby* (New York: Columbia, 1927), p. 62, Napier Wilt's *Some American Humorists* (New York: Nelson, 1929), p. xi, and Franklin J. Meine's *Tall Tales of the Southwest* (New York: Knopf, 1930), pp. xxix-xxx.

[3] "Official Report of Professor John Phoenix, A.M.," "A New System of English Grammar," "Musical Review Extraordinary," "Lectures on Astronomy," "Illustrated Newspapers," "Sandyago—a Soliloquy," "Fourth of July Celebration in San Diego," "Melancholy Accident," "A Full Account of the San Francisco Antiquarian Society," "Review of New Books," "Lectures on Astronomy Continued," and "A Legend of the Tehama House."

[4] *The Complete Works of Artemus Ward* (New York: Carleton, 1883), pp. 157-189.

[5] Don C. Seitz, *Artemus Ward* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1919), pp. 239-292.

works are studded with briefer bits of burlesque writing.[6] Mark Twain, beginning his career as a humorist for *The Californian,* wrote seven burlesques for that paper, taking off orations, historical writings, answers to correspondents, and the Sunday School story.[7] And burlesques are to be found in Clemens's later works. He parodied the playbill and dramatic criticism, for example, in *Innocents Abroad,* the Sunday School speech in *The Gilded Age* and *Tom Sawyer;* and the obituary poem furnished a target for his shafts on at least three occasions. And when Bill Nye, the last important funny man of the old school, published his first book in 1881, he parodied the ode, the fictional romance, the campaign song, the oration, the political speech, the biblical parable, the lyric, and the newspaper "answers to correspondents" department;[8] and most of his later books were also sprinkled with burlesques.

Most of the comic papers printed burlesques by leading humorists and by minor figures as well. The first volume of *Vanity Fair,* to cite one of many publications which might serve equally as well, contained no less than eighteen burlesques, some of them continued through several issues.[9] Somewhat later, a writer in *Vanity Fair* hardly exaggerated when he said:

To burlesque is now deemed sublime; to be serious is to be ridiculous. . . . We are engaged in a noble work. We are doing for literature what the actors are doing for the stage—we are simplifying matters—stripping them of their excrescences, and proving that everything is susceptible of being burlesqued.[10]

[6] Note, for example, *op. cit.,* pp. 52-54 (burlesque oration), pp. 64-67 (burlesque dramatic criticism), pp. 78-79 (burlesque resolutions), and pp. 316-320 (burlesque autobiography).

[7] The writings of Mark Twain for the paper are listed in Bret Harte and Mark Twain, *Sketches of the Sixties* (San Francisco: John Howell, 1926), pp. 219-221.

[8] *Bill Nye and Boomerang* (Chicago: Belford, Clarke & Co., 1881).

[9] *Vanity Fair,* Vol. I, Dec. 31, 1859-June 16, 1860, included "Reynard the Fox" (burlesque fable), p. 5; "Song of the Locomotive" (Hood's "Song of the Shirt"), 20; "The Message Made Easy" (political speech), 24; "New Guide to Central Park" (guide book), 87; "Song of the Shirtless" (Hood's poem), 91; "Il Politico" (grand opera), 132-133; "Scene from the Political Drama of Romeo and Juliet," 157; "Conservative's Lament" (Tennyson), 181; "Counter Jumps" (Walt Whitman), 183; "The Gentle Shepherd" (Bible), 196-7; "The Doom of the Iron Law" (novel), 212; "Habits of Good Society" (etiquette book), 231, and continued in several issues; "The Counter Jumper Swell" (Aldrich's "Babie Bell"), 263; "Don't Give Up the Belt" (poem), 308; "Our Agricultural Column" (hints to farmers); "Punning Made Easy" (textbook on rhetoric), 356, and continued through several issues; "Life of Lincoln (Abraham)" (biography), 389.

[10] "The Burlesque Business," *Vanity Fair,* IV, 245 (Nov. 20, 1861). The reference to the stage no doubt had to do with the burlesques of Brougham and others, which, as Mr. Walter

These facts indicate, in a general way, the eminence of the parody as a humorous form. A more complete understanding of the extensive use of the form, and of its chief devices, may be arrived at by tracing three important and prevalent types of burlesque through the period during which the native school of humorists was most active (*c.*1830-*c.*1896). A study of the burlesques of oratory, of history, and of fiction shows how the comic writers tilted at fine writing and pseudo-romanticism.

II

The oratorical style of the period was thus criticized by a hostile critic in 1889:

> To beautify "elegant" sentiment with "elegant" if elephantine rhetorical frilligigs, is the highest delight of the "elegant" orator, who despises "plain" English. His interest in simple words becomes compound when he can use three syllables instead of one. . . . He thinks it more blessed to "donate" than to give, and more refreshing to bathe in a "natatorium" than in a bath."[11]

Naturally such a style was a red flag to men blessed with humor, and the artificialities which the critic denounced were frequently sprinkled over pages intended not to inspire but to amuse.

Whole books by minor humorists were filled with hilarious apings of the popular orator. Even sermons were parodied extensively. Joseph F. Paige, writing under the pseudonym of "Dow, Jr.," published one volume of "short patent sermons" in 1841, and reissued them, with many additions, sixteen years later.[12] Two unidentified humorists put the high-flown words of ministers into Dutch and negro dialect.[13] One of William Penn Brannen's parody sermons, frequently reprinted, gave a title to a famous collection of humor in 1858.[14] Works other than sermons furnished inspirations

Prichard Eaton has remarked in *The Drama in English* (New York: Scribner's, 1930), pp. 230-231, "punctured the pontifical solemnity of the romantic tradition and constantly introduced a contemporary note."

[11] "Newspaper Americanisms," *The Critic*, XIV, 236 (May 11, 1889).

[12] *Short Patent Sermons* (New York: Lawrence Labree, 1841). The second edition was published by Peterson of Philadelphia in four volumes. Several of the sermons first appeared in *The New York Mercury*.

[13] *Comic Lectures on Everything in General and Nothing in Particular.* By Deacon Snowball and Diedrich Lager-Blatter (New York: Frederick A. Brady, [n.d.]).

[14] *The Harp of a Thousand Strings* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1858), reissued in 1865.

for other parodists. The popular publishers of dime novels, Beadle & Co., issued, in 1863, a *Comic Speaker* which contains nothing but burlesque oratory—"A Texan Eulogium," supposedly delivered by a pompous orator in the state legislature, and testifying to the greatness of the late "Solomon Dill"; "The United States," in which it is remarked, with flourishes, that ours is a fine country; the spiel of "The Mountebank" with testimonials; "Sermon on the Feet"; "Political Stump Speech"; and others. So popular was the oratorical burlesque that two examples crept into *Beadle's Exhibition Speaker* (New York, 1881), where they rubbed shoulders with specimens of the style they parodied.[15] Dr. W. Valentine issued two volumes largely made up of burlesque speeches.[16]

Echoes of the oratorical style found their way into writings of authors who were not primarily interested in parody. Colonel Crockett's speeches, intentionally or unintentionally, resort to grandiloquence. Major Jack Downing recorded some of the flights of political spellbinders with whom he had contacts. *The Biglow Papers,* in the "Debate in the Sennit," which caricatures the bombastic oratory of the Southern Calhoun, and elsewhere, offers amusing parodies. Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes* (1835), Hooper's *Simon Suggs* (1845), Baldwin's *Flush Times* (1853), the *Orpheus C. Kerr Papers* (1861-2), and Harris's *Sut Lovingood* (1867) contain brief passages in the conventional style. Artemus Ward's "The Crisis" and "A War Meeting" quote typically ornate speeches, and one is hardly surprised to hear the illiterate Petroleum V. Nasby roar: "Fellow whites, arowz! The inemy is onto us! Our harths is in danger! . . . Rally agin Conway! Rally agin Higler! Rally agin the porter at the Reed House!"[17] Later Max Adeler, Robert Burdette, and Bill Nye frequently used the oration as humorous material.

One particular variety of the oration was more prevalent and more pretentious, perhaps, than any other during the period—the Fourth of July Address of the type commented on in Cooper's *Home as Found* in 1838. The Independence Day orator, a necessary part

[15] "The Orator of the Day" and "The Disconcerted Candidate" show an elegant orator being interrupted by a vulgar audience whose remarks are painfully uncouth.

[16] *A Budget of Wit and Humor* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald [*c.* 1857?]) and *Comic Lectures and Comic Metamorphoses* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald [n.d.]).

[17] *Struggles* (1871), p. 42.

of every celebration of the Fourth, felt, as James Bryce said, "bound to talk his very tallest" in order that the eagle might scream while the perspiring audience applauded. Famous orators such as Webster, Everett, and Sumner, and orators famed only in their own villages summoned all their artistry to praise their country. And after the speaker's thunder had died, the committee, with his permission, embalmed his words in little pamphlets destined to grow dusty on library shelves.

As early as 1856, George H. Derby ("Phoenix") parodied all the elements of the printed pamphlet of this type in his "Fourth of July Oration in Oregon," which contains the request by the local committee that John Phoenix appear and orate, John's condescending compliance, and, finally, the highly embroidered speech.[18] The same day, according to Artemus Ward, the genial showman spoke in Weathersfield, Connecticut, famous "for her onyins and patritism the world over."[19] In 1875, *Mose Skinner's Centennial* preserved an oration which began, auspiciously, "One hundred years ago the spot where we now stand was located elsewhere . . . . " and in 1881, *Beadle's Exhibition Speaker* recorded the remarks of "The Orator of of the Day."

Typical as an example of these parodies was the address included in Bill Nye's "How the Fourth Was Celebrated at Whalen's Grove Last Year," delivered by "a self-made man from Hickory township" and embodied in a burlesque country newspaper account.[20] The opening words remind one of the beginning of an actual address given July 4, 1824, in New York, in which Dr. Hooper Cumming, the orator, said:

> Auspicious Morn! which witnesses the noblest declaration that ever issued from the lips of patriotism. Auspicious morn! which gilded the manly brows, and dilated the benevolent bosoms . . . of . . . Jefferson, and Adams, and Franklin . . . which heard three millions of freemen exclaim, "The sword of the Lord and of Washington."[21]

[18] *The Squibob Papers* (New York: Carleton, 1865), pp. 13-42. The address was published in newspaper form nine years earlier.

[19] "Fourth of July Address," *op. cit.*, pp. 116-119. The article was first printed in *The Cleveland Plain-Dealer*, July 16, 1859, and later in *Vanity Fair*, in 1861.

[20] *Bill Nye's Chestnuts* (Chicago; Belford, Clarke & Co., 1887), pp. 21-29.

[21] Quoted by Mr. Edmund Pearson in *Queer Books* (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1928), pp. 27-28. Mr. Pearson's amusing essay, "Making the Eagle Scream," in which the quotation appears, gives a brief history of the Independence Day oration and some satires on it.

Said Nye's Hickory township orator:

Fellow Citizens: This is the anniversary of the day when freedom towards all and malice towards none first got a foothold in this country. And we are now to celebrate that day. I say that on that day Tireny and uzurpation got a set-back they will never recover from. We then paved the way for the poor, oppressed foreigner, so that he could come to our shores and take liberties with our form of government. . . .

A moment later, Nye's orator asked why the country had been blessed as it was:

Why are we today a free people, with a surplus in the treasury that nobody can get at? . . . Why are our resources so great that they almost equal our liabilities? Why is everything done to make it pleasant for the rich man and every inducement held out for the poor man to accumulate more and more poverty? Why is it that so much is said about the tariff by men who do not support their own families?

Years before, on July 4, 1814, similarly puzzled, Robert Y. Hayne had asked a Charleston audience:

In what then, my countrymen, does your superior lot consist? Does the verdure of your field delight the eye? The vineyards of France . . . display equal beauty. Are your mountains the objects of your admiration? . . . in the glaciers of Switzerland you will behold nature in her grandeur and simplicity. . . .

He answered his perplexing question as follows: "The United States . . . is the only free country on earth."[22] Nye's orator was less considerate; he did not get around to a reply to his question, being, perhaps, too eager to conclude on the note that "whatever may be said about our refinement and our pork, our style of freedom is sought for everywhere. It is a freedom that will stand any climate. . . ."

Nye's system of parody is similar to that employed by others who burlesqued oratory. With the grand style he mingled homely words and phrases, and for the picture book version of contemporary conditions he substituted the realist's knowledge of facts. Then he ended the speech, not with a hair-raising peroration, but with an absurd anti-climax.

[22] Quoted by Pearson, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-26.

III

The treatment of history by the humorists presented as much of a contrast to the ornate romantic historical works of the period. Comic treatments were numerous after "A Comic History of the United States" ran through several issues of Volume II of *Yankee Doodle* (1847-48). At least six books published between 1861 and 1894 were occupied with a recounting of the nation's story by burlesque historians.[23] Furthermore, many humorists made briefer excursions into historical writing—Mark Twain, Orpheus C. Kerr, Artemus Ward, George H. Derby, and Max Adeler among them.

The humorous historians were consistently irreverent; they made historical events comical by stressing foibles of honored leaders; they constantly mingled the realistic with the romantic, the colloquial with the elegant. Washington's appearance, asserted Derby, might be discovered by looking at "a portrait by Gilbert Stuart, of this great soldier and statesman . . . taken when the general was in the act of chewing tobacco, the left cheek distended. . . ."[24] Hopkins noted that "Washington crossing the Delaware furnished a very good subject for a very bad painting, which may be seen among other bad paintings in the Rotunda of the Capitol at Washington . . . at first sight . . . mistaken for an advertising dodge of some ice company. . . ."[25] Artemus Ward, his "bossum" heaving "with sollum emotions" as he views the spot "where our revolutionary forefathers asserted their independence and spilt their Blud," is reminded that the sacred ground is "good for white beans and potatoes, but as regards raisin' wheat, 't'aint worth a dam."[26] Mark Twain, writing in about 1870, of "The Late Benjamin Franklin," remembers with rancor Franklin's industry, his maxims which "were full of animosity toward boys," his stove "that would smoke your head off in four hours by the clock."[27] The parodists were

[23] [Willis Hazard], *Herod Otis . . . Pictorial History of the United States . . .* (New York: Leavitt & Allen, 1861); [John L. Newell], *Orpheus C. Kerr's Smoked Glass* (New York: G. W. Carleton, 1868), which treated the Reconstruction period: John D. Sherwood, *The Comic History of the United States* (Boston: Fields, Osgood & Co., 1870); Livingstone Hopkins, *A Comic History of the United States* (New York: American Book Exchange, 1880); *Bricktop's Comic History of America* (New York: M. J. Ivens & Co., 1893), and *Bill Nye's History of the United States* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1894). Internal evidence seems to indicate that *Bricktop's History* first appeared in 1876.

[24] *Squibob Papers* (New York, 1865), p. 32. [25] *Op. cit.*, p. 111. [26] *Op. cit.*, p. 80.

[27] *Sketches New and Old* (Author's National Edition), (New York: Harper, 1903), XIX, 211-215.

most joyous when they found a chance to tie up homely material with glamorous figures or romantic moments of history.

Often the grandiloquent style affected by popular historians was travestied in anticlimaxes. Gazing upon the figure of Garibaldi, Orpheus C. Kerr passionately told his reader: "Behold him, then, at his tasks"—and then he added a few details—"in a red shirt amputated at the neck, and two yellow patches . . . flaming from the background of his seat of learning."[28] Bricktop painted a beautiful picture of Washington at Valley Forge, "his army reduced to sickness and desertion. . . . Add to this the terrors of one of the severest winters ever known, and understand that his army was half naked and had hardly any shelter from the winter, and you have only a portion of the picture, for starvation threatened them. . . . " Then the tone changes as the writer adds: "Strip a man's back and pinch his belly, and you have a very good test of his patriotism if he stands without kicking. The men at Valley Forge didn't kick—they lacked the strength to."[29] And Nye found a part of a Fourth of July address fitted quite nicely into a history:

> All over that little republic, so begun in sorrow and travail, there came in after-years the dimples and the smiles of the prosperous child who would one day rise in the lap of the mother-country, and, asserting its rights . . . place a large and disagreeable fire-cracker under the nose of royalty, that, busting the awful stillness, should jar the empires of the earth, and blow the unblown noses of future kings and princes. (This is taken bodily from a speech made by me July 4, 1777, when I was young.—THE AUTHOR.)

Certainly, if attitude and manner are considered, these playful chroniclers were, in their way, predecessors of modern realistic writers on history. In a period when most American histories were written in the romantic tradition and the grandiloquent style, the humorists worked for realism by looking at the past through worldly eyes and by poking fun at the gilded mannerisms and heightened materials of serious historians.

[28] "Life of General Garibaldi," *Orpheus C. Kerr Papers* (New York, 1862), pp. 297-304.
[29] *Op. cit.*, p. 45.
[30] *Bill Nye's History of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1894), p. 41.

IV

But if the humorists found affectations and impossible romanticism in the orations and the histories of the century, they found even more absurdities in the popular novels of the time. Many an impassioned writer of romance in the period, after a few moralizing paragraphs, began his story in something like the following fashion:

. . . Surrounded as he (the hero) was by hills on every side, naked rocks dared the efforts of his energies. Soon the sky became overcast, the sun buried itself in the clouds, and the fair day gave place to gloomy twilight, which lay heavily on the Indian Plains. . . . The mountain air breathed fragrance—a rosy tinge rested on the glassy waters that murmured. . . . Beside the shore of the brook sat a young man about eighteen or twenty, who seemed to be reading some favorite book, and who had a remarkably noble countenance—eyes which betrayed more than a common mind.[31]

Nye, perceiving the excellence of such an opening, thus started his burlesque novel, "Pumpkin Jim; or the Tale of a Busted Jackass Rabbit:"

It was evening in the mountains. The golden god of day was gliding slowly adown the crimson west. Here and there the cerulean dome was flecked with snowy clouds.

The flecks were visible to the naked eye.

Meanwhile the golden god of day, hereinbefore referred to, continued to glide adown the crimson west, with about the same symmetrical glide. It had done so on several occasions previous to the opening of this story.[32]

Nye, too, showed a partiality for heroes with noble countenances: a little later,

All at once, like a flash of dazzling light, a noble youth came slowly down the mountain side, riding an ambling palfrey of the narrow gauge variety.[33]

The palfrey unfortunately stumbled and sat down upon the young man.

[31] The passage is quoted from a novel which pleased Mark Twain so much with its unconscious humor that he reprinted the whole in *The American Claimant and Other Stories and Sketches—The Enemy Conquered; or, Love Triumphant* (New Haven, 1845), pp. 7-8. Clemens thought it an unusual book, but it is not difficult to find many which are as amazingly bad.

[32] *Bill Nye and Boomerang*, p. 90.

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 105.

"Curses upon thee, thou base and treacherous mule!" he muttered, brokenly. "By my beard, thou hast poorly repaid me for my unremitting kindness to thee. Ah, alack, alack, alack—"[34]

This was the proper sort of language for a hero to use. The hero here had another idiosyncrasy: he was Jesse James in disguise. He was therefore good heroic material. In 1861, Orpheus C. Kerr had pointed out that writers of popular fiction had a genius—

> . . . a power of creating an unnatural and unmitigated ruffian for a hero, my boy, at whose shrine all created crinoline and immense delegations of inferior broadcloth are impelled to bow. Such a one was that old humbug, Rochester, the beloved of "Jane Eyre." The character has been done-over scores of times since poor Charlotte Bronte gave her novel to the world, and is still "much used in respectable families."[35]

And Kerr had indicated the justice of his criticism in a burlesque, "Higgins. An Autobiography. By Gushalina Crushit," in which a very innocent woman adores a perfect monster.[36] Artemus Ward had discovered the tendency, and had complimented *The Atlantic Monthly* because: "It don't print stories with piruts and honist young men into 'em, making the piruts splendid fellers and the honist young men dis'gree'ble idiots—so that our darters very nat'rally prefer the piruts to the honist young idiots. . . ."[37] Ward parodied the despised type of story in "The Fair Inez,"[38] the hero of which is a picturesque corsair; in "Moses the Sassy";[39] "Roberto the Rover";[40] and "Red Hand,"[41] wherein elegant desperadoes and "piruts" play important parts.

Another type of hero, the lover who "isn't handsome, but . . . very good," is the hero of Nye's "The Lop-Eared Lovers of the Little Laramie."[42] His remarks still "sound so much like reading from a manuscript, that the reader can't help pitying him,"[43] but his

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 106.
[35] *Orpheus C. Kerr Papers*, p. 64.
[36] *Ibid.*, pp. 66-73.
[37] Browne, *The Complete Works of Artemus Ward* (New York, 1883,) pp. 81-82.
[38] First published in *Vanity Fair*, Vol. IV (July 27, 1861-August 24, 1861), and reprinted in Seitz, *op. cit.*, 239-276.
[39] *Vanity Fair*, III, 273 (June 15, 1861), and Browne, *op. cit.*, pp. 157-161.
[40] Browne, *op. cit.*, pp. 169-173.
[41] *Ibid.*, pp. 173-177.
[42] *Bill Nye and Boomerang*, pp. 118-126.
[43] Quoted from Bill Nye's essay, "Fiction," in *Forty Liars and Other Lies* (Chicago, 1893), p. 228, first published in 1882. The article shows that Nye had definite critical ideas concerning the current fiction which he parodied.

eloquent elegance makes him no less red-blooded or brave. In "The True Tale of William Tell,"[44] another type of hero and another type of story—the historical romance—are parodied. And "Patrick Oleson" makes light of the deserving and persevering young man who works his way up to great success.[45] Thus Nye burlesqued a fairly wide range of fictional types.

In thus making light of the romantic nineteenth-century fiction, Nye was in line with other humorists of the American school. As early as 1858, a collection of humorous skits, *The Harp of a Thousand Strings,* had included three examples of parodied popular fiction.[46] *Vanity Fair,* during its entire career, had published a steady stream of burlesque tales.[47] Artemus Ward had created not only the parodies treating rascally heroes cited above but also six other burlesques, two of which held up to ridicule the popular French novels and the choppy style later to furnish capital for Bret Harte. In the three series of *Orpheus C. Kerr Papers,* Newell had included ten burlesque novels of various types, including two parodies of Dickens, and in 1870, he had devoted an entire volume to a parody of Dickens's last work.[48] C. H. Webb had issued, in two separate volumes, parodies of very popular novels,[49] and had later reprinted the two with another burlesque novel and some poetic parodies in one volume.[50] In 1867, Bret Harte, as much in the tradition as Nye was to be, had published his *Condensed Novels.* Mark Twain, using some of the tricks which were to be useful in *A Connecticut Yankee,*

[44] *Ibid.,* pp. 158-160.

[45] *Ibid.,* pp. 75-80. Of course, according to the realistic Nye, Patrick's perseverance, much to the hero's surprise, brought him nothing.

[46] "The Skeleton in the Cupboard, a Tale of Crinoline" (152-155), "Nautical Novel" (227), and "My Elopement" (349-363).

[47] Every volume of the magazine between Dec. 31, 1859 and June 2, 1862, excepting Vol. II, contained burlesque fiction. Seven parodies in all were published, four of them continued through several issues. Notable works were two by Artemus Ward, Fitz-Hugh Ludlow's "The Primpenny Family" (14 installments), McArone's "Rantanquero de Boom-Jing-Jing; or the Wrath of the Rebel Rival," and "A Quarter of Twelve" by Orpheus C. Kerr.

[48] Orpheus C. Kerr, *The Cloven Hoof: Being an Adaptation of "The Mystery of Erwin Drood"* (New York: Carleton, 1870).

[49] *Liffith Lank; or, Lunacy* (New York: Carleton, 1866), a parody of *Griffith Gaunt,* and *St. Twel'mo; or, the Cuneiform Cyclopedist of Chattanooga* (New York: C. H. Webb, 1867), a parody of *St. Elmo.*

[50] John Paul [C. H. Webb], *Parodies, Prose and Verse* (New York: Carleton, 1876). The other parody in the volume was "A Wicked Woman."

in a burlesque novel had poked fun at the medieval romance.[51] The humorous periodicals had continued the attack.[52] And Robert Burdette, in 1877, had mocked the ghost story and the romantic novel.[53] The list of burlesque tales might be continued almost indefinitely.

The passages quoted from Nye's mock fiction indicate the method of attack used by all of the parodists of the novel. Like Nye, they exaggerated the unlifelike characterizations, the absurd plots, and the water-color backgrounds which were fashionable, until their absurdity, thus magnified, became quite evident. They treated the lacy style of novelists as they had treated the unnatural styles of orators and historians, demonstrating its artificiality by mingling with it the natural everyday speech of human beings. An extended consideration would indicate that other romantic expressions were just as consistently attacked by the rough-and-tumble humorists—the "pious editorial," the moral tale, the obituary poem which was an off-spring of the graveyard school of poetry,[54] and others.

It is evident that the burlesque was an important form in the work of humorists in America in the nineteenth century. It is evident, too, that in an age when recognized critics felt that almost every review of fiction must be laudatory, these unlettered comic men were the most important adverse critics of popular fiction. And their attacks, in the form of burlesques, hit squarely at the worst features of contemporary romantic writing, in behalf of the realism which they had practiced and encouraged.

[51] "Awful, Terrible Medieval Romance" first published in *Mark Twain's Burlesque Autobiography and First Romance* (New York: Sheldon & Co. [1871]), pp. 24-46. Clemens here took off the grandiloquent style and the complicated plot, getting his heroine into such a mess that he could not finish.

[52] *The Boneville Trumpet* (1868-9) was full of burlesques. *Puck* was a valiant parodist throughout its career; a volume picked at random—Vol. VIII (1880-1881)—contained eight burlesque novels, three of them serialized, "Fresh as the Dew, by Arthur W. Zola Black Lot," "N. Dymion, by Penchamin Tisraeli," and "A 19th Century Boom."

[53] *The Rise and Fall of the Moustache* (Burlington: Burlington Publishing Company, 1877), pp. 210-249, 173-176.

[54] The burlesque obituary has been traced in a sketchy fashion in *The Sweet Singer of Michigan,* ed. and with an introduction by Walter Blair, (Chicago: Pascal Covici, 1928), pp. xvii-xxiv, where mock obituaries by Clemens (1870, 1883, 1896), Max Adeler (1874), Eugene Field (1880), Knox and Sweet (1882) and Bill Nye (1884) are treated. To the list of parodists mentioned may be added Phoenix, Nasby, Eli Perkins, and Burdette.

THE POPULARITY OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN HUMORISTS

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THE POPULARITY OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN HUMORISTS

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JUST HOW popular were the writers of American humor in the years of the last century during which they were most active (*c.* 1830-*c.* 1896)? The question seems worth considering for at least three reasons. An answer will reveal just how true is the impression, fostered by hostile critics of the period, that the great reading public existed on a diet of nothing much except the sugary fare offered by ladies' books and popular romances. Further, an answer will, perhaps, help one understand why *Innocents Abroad* found thirty-one thousand buyers within six months of its appearance and thus launched Mark Twain's remarkable career. And finally, if—as historians have recently held—American humorists were important as predecessors of the realists, data on this subject of popularity will indicate to some extent how these heralds managed to make themselves heard. For these reasons, I have attempted to discover and record some of the facts which show how the nineteenth-century literary comedians recruited an audience.

I

Several factors, apparently, were important in giving American humor the prominence which it achieved. An early and lasting stimulus to a wide interest in native comic creations, it is probable, was the stage presentation by many actors of humorous American characters. When *The Contrast* was performed in 1787, the stage Yankee, Jonathan, stumbled into the theater for the first time, spouting slang, parading his rustic foibles. The play was a pronounced success,[1] and as a natural result of its popularity, dozens of other dramas portraying similarly vulgar characters followed.[2] Not only the Yankee but also other figures important in the new humor of

[1] For details concerning the success of the play, see G. O. Seilhamer, *History of the American Theatre* (New York, 1888-1891), II, 275-285.

[2] A history of such characters is given in Perley Isaac Reed's "The Realistic Presentation of American Characters in Native American Plays Prior to Eighteen Seventy," *Ohio State University Bulletin*, May, 1918, Vol. XXII, no. 26.

America were portrayed. Ralph Stackpole, frontiersman in *Nick of the Woods,* was a successful stage figure. Davy Crockett, comedian of the canebrakes, Colonel Nimrod Wildfire, and other frontiersmen pleased audiences in New York and the provinces. Minstrel troupes offered boisterous blackface jokers who used typical American humor, including some of the jests of Artemus Ward. One play, *Eli Among the Cowboys,* pictured Eli Perkins captured by plainsmen during a lecture tour in Wyoming.[3] At least two newspaper paragraphers, J. Amroy Knox and Charles H. Hoyt, became playwrights whose dramas were successful. Thus, throughout the period, humor of the salty native type found its way to the stage.

Actors made reputations as portrayers of Yankees or kindred types. Ludlow, dressed in the picturesque costume of a Western boatman, roared out the words of "The Hunters of Kentucky" while rough audiences in showhouses along the Ohio and Mississippi applauded with "a prolonged whoop, or howl. . . ."[4] J. H. Hackett was Nimrod Wildfire, Jonathan Ploughboy, and Solon Shingle. Yankee Hill won fame in England as well as America by portraying Yankee types. Joseph Jefferson was applauded as he played the rôle of Asa Trenchard. Chanfrau triumphed as Mose, the tough fire-boy, and John T. Raymond as Mark Twain's Colonel Mulberry Sellers in *The Gilded Age.*[5] Some actors, in addition to playing character parts, offered monologues—Dr. W. Valentine, Sol Smith, Sol Smith Russell, and Yankee Hill. These monologues, composed by the actors or perhaps in some cases by humorists,[6] augmented the flood of humorous books, in which monologues were often an important feature.[7] And when J. H. Hackett went to *The New York Leader* as a journalist, writing lines similar to those which he spoke on the stage, he gave printed humor an impetus his stage career had made possible.

[3] Eli Perkins, *Thirty Years of Wit* (New York: Cassell Publishing Company, 1891), pp. 295-296.

[4] Archer B. Hulbert, *The Paths of Inland Commerce* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921), pp. 62-63.

[5] For a brief account of these actors, see Arthur Hornblow, *A History of the Theatre in America* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1919), II, 64-65, 68-69.

[6] Burdette may have prepared some monologues for Sol Smith Russell. See Clara B. Burdette, *Robert J. Burdette: His Message* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston Company, 1922), p. 126.

[7] Valentine, Smith, and Hill published volumes of anecdotes.

II

Thus to the theater audiences of the period the new humor became familiar. An even vaster audience, the group interested in politics, found much material in native comic writings to interest it. As Joel Chandler Harris said:

> First and last, humor has played a very large part in our political campaigns; in fact, it may be said that it has played almost as large a part as principle—which is the name that politicians give to their theories. It is a fact that . . . the happy allusion, the humorous anecdote . . . will change the whole prospects of a political struggle.[8]

A large part of the humor between 1830 and the end of the century dealt with political themes. Major Jack Downing, from the start of his literary career, and the imitators of Jack Downing as well, constantly commented shrewdly upon political struggles. Davy Crockett, with whom Downing carried on some correspondence, was apparently exploited as a political figure; and his writings were necessarily tied up with current contests.[9] The story of Simon Suggs was written in the guise of a campaign biography, and *Major Jones's Travels* and Bagby's *Letters of Mozis Addums* contain political comments. W. P. Trent notes the preoccupation of humorists with politics:

> Lowell being put to one side, there are at least five political humorists of importance belonging to the eventful years 1830-70 . . . Seba Smith, Charles Augustus Davis (1795-1867), Robert Henry Newell (1836-1901), the "Orpheus C. Kerr" whose letters gave Lincoln needed relaxation. . . , Charles Henry Smith ("Bill Arp," born in 1826), and David R. Locke [Petroleum V. Nasby]. To these one is almost tempted to add Richard Grant White, whose *New Gospel of Peace* . . . [was] a clever and very popular parody of the style of the historical books of the Old Testament.[10]

To the list also may be added Artemus Ward, whose political writings were, if not numerous, telling.

During the years when several of these political humorists were active, one of America's outstanding political figures did much to

[8] *The World's Wit and Humor: American* (New York: Review of Reviews Company, 1906), I, xx.

[9] See V. L. Parrington, *The Romantic Revolution in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927), pp. 172-179.

[10] "Retrospect of American Humor," *Century*, LXIII, 54-55 (November, 1901).

focus attention on contemporary humorous works. Lincoln, as Professor Pattee has pointed out, "stood in the limelight of the Presidency, transacting the nation's business with anecdotes from the frontier circuits, meeting hostile critics with shrewd border philosophy, and reading aloud with unction, while battles were raging or election returns were in doubt, from 'Artemus Ward,' or 'Petroleum Vesuvius Nasby,' or *The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi*—favorites of his because they too were genuine, excerpts not from books but from life itself."[11]

Furthermore, there were few important comic journals which did not battle valiantly in the field of politics. The pages of *John Donkey* (1848), *Vanity Fair* (1859-63), *Puck* (1877-1907), and *Judge* (1888-) were full of political cartoons and satires. Newspaper comic men constantly carried on political conflicts in the period after the war as before the war: Locke, Peck, "Brick" Pomeroy of *The La Crosse Democrat,* Bailey, Burdette, and Eli Perkins. It was not a mere accident that one of the most vicious fictional attacks upon industrial control in politics was made by a humorist, Mark Twain, in *The Gilded Age.* The tradition of the use of political material for humorous purposes was extended through the whole period down to the jestings of Mr. Dooley and Will Rogers about statesmen and demagogues. The nation always has been interested in frank and amusing comments upon political events.

III

The newspapers were active in carrying this humorous material into every part of the nation. Not long after 1830, every paper that could discover a comic writer on its staff was encouraging him to provide amusement for its readers. A few comments indicate how the practice of publishing humor grew. In 1847, *Yankee Doodle* said:

> After the perusal of our exchanges we could not but conclude that the demand for wit has increased of late to an alarming extent throughout the press of the country, and that as usual the supply has been equal to the demand. The whole editorial corps must have deadly designs

[11] *A History of American Literature since 1870* (New York: The Century Co., 1917), pp. 27-28.

upon the community which they propose to accomplish by making it "laugh itself to death" collectively.[12]

In 1866, *The North American Review* remarked, with mock concern:

> . . . Our own Boston Daily Advertiser—a bulwark of resistance against needless and unauthorized innovations, a host in itself to withstand temptations of levity and trifling—has yielded so far to this demand [for humorous columns in the newspaper] that, though not yet a professedly comic paper, it has introduced a series of general paragraphs of a nature light and humorous enough to make the old issues turn in their very files for amazement. Far and wide, daily, weekly, and monthly publications issue from the press to face us with at least one feature smiling.[13]

Six years later, a historian of American journalism said:

> Our four or five thousand daily and weekly publications have columns of 'Nuts to Crack,' 'Sunbeams,' 'Sparks from the Telegraph,' 'Freshest Gleanings,' 'Odds and Ends,' 'News Sprinklings,' 'Flashes of Fun,' 'Random Readings,' 'Mere Mentions,' 'Humor of the Day,' 'Quaint Sayings,' 'Current Notes,' 'Things in General,' 'Brevities,' 'Witticisms,' 'Notes of the Day,' 'Jottings,' 'All Sorts,' 'Editor's Drawer,' 'Sparks,' 'Fun and Folly,' 'Fact and Fiction,' 'Twinklings.'
>
> These are the daily dishes set before our sovereigns. They are the comic departments of the regular Press. We need not count the names of our wits and humorists on the ends of our fingers. . . . We are a nation full of such characters, perhaps a little thin here and there, but always in abundance and in good humor. . . . Our wit . . . goes into all the papers.[14]

And a year later, in 1873, Edmund Clarence Stedman, one of the old school, a little frightened and somewhat disgusted, was writing to a friend: "The whole country, owing to the *contagion* of our American exchange system, is flooded, deluged, swamped, beneath a muddy tide of slang, vulgarity, inartistic bathos, impertinence and buffoonery that is not wit." He blamed Hay and Harte and par-

[12] "Witty Paragraphs," *Yankee Doodle*, II, 113 (June 19, 1847).

[13] Review of Artemus Ward's *Travels* in *The North American Review*, CII, 589 (April, 1866).

[14] Frederick Hudson, *Journalism in the United States from 1690-1872* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1873), pp. 695-696.

ticularly cited Josh Billings and "The Danbury News man" as responsible with them for what he called "the present *horrible* degeneracy in public taste."[15]

In 1880, when Nye, the last great figure of the old school, began his career, the paper which did not have a humorous column was exceptional. *The Asheville Journal, The Boston Post, The Oil City Derrick, The Philadelphia Bulletin, The Oshkosh Banner, The San Francisco Post, The Ouray Solid Muldoon,* and thousands of others purveyed humorous writings which were read in villages and hamlets as well as cities.[16]

These numerous papers did not stop with the publication of the jests of their own humorists; in addition, they published material picked up from other publications. This practice was widespread, as *The Boneville Trumpet* (Bridgeport, Connecticut) pointed out at the top of a column headed, "Our Grab Gag":

. . . everybody is informed that GOAKS found in this column never cost this establishment a cent; the Editor having adopted the *grab-game* (at present so popular with the majority of authors and editors of literary papers), not being able to pay the prices demanded for such by patentees themselves.[17]

Giving credit sometimes, often withholding it,[18] newspapers and

[15] Letter to Bayard Taylor, September 16, 1873, in Laura Stedman and G. M. Gould, *Life and Letters of Edmund Clarence Stedman* (New York: Moffatt, Yard and Company, 1910), I, 447. The italics are Stedman's.

[16] A list including only the most popular would name, in addition to the above, *Atlanta Constitution, Baltimore Every Saturday, Baltimore Sun, Bloomington Eve, Boston Commercial-Bulletin, Boston Evening Star, Boston Traveler, Boston Transcript, Bridgeport Standard, Brooklyn Eagle, Buffalo News, Buffalo Our Record, Buffalo Times, Burlington Hawkeye, Cambridge Tribune, Carson Appeal, Chicago Commercial Advertiser, Chicago National Weekly, Chicago Tribune, Cincinnati Star, Danbury News, Denver Tribune, Detroit Free Press, Elmira Free Press, Erie Herald, Fairfield Times, Galveston News, Huntsville Item, Kansas City Times, Kokomo Tribune, LaCrosse Democrat, Laramie Sentinel, Lowell Courier, Marathon Independent, Marlborough Times, Meriden Recorder, New Haven Register, New Orleans Picayune, New Orleans Times-Democrat, New York Commercial Advertiser, New York Express, New York Graphic, New York Herald, Owego Recorder, Peoria Transcript, Philadelphia Bulletin, Philadelphia Kronicle Herald, Pittsburgh Leader, Portland Courier, Providence Star, Quincey Modern Argus, Richmond State, Rochester Democrat, Rochester Express, Rome Sentinel, St. Louis Spirit, San Francisco Chronicle, San Francisco News Letter, Somerville Journal, Southport Times, Steubenville Herald, Syracuse Times, Toledo Blade, Towanda Enterprise, Troy Press, Turners' Falls Reporter, Virginia City Enterprise, Waterloo Observer, Wheeling Leader, Whitehall Times,* and *Yonkers Statesman.*

[17] Issue of March 13, 1861, I, 6.

[18] *Yankee Doodle, The Spirit of the Times,* and *Puck* carried on vehement campaigns against the failure of papers to give credit to exchanges from which they pilfered material.

periodicals all over the country passed along the best humorous sketches, anecdotes, poems, and paragraphs discovered in exchanges. And since laws allowed exchange copies to be sent without postage, and since newspapers were eager to borrow good material, exchange lists were long; each newspaper sprinkled its pages with quotations from papers of every part of the United States. I was able, with little effort, to compile a list of eighty papers which were quoted in at least two publications in 1880.[19]

An author with a faculty for writing skits which caught the attention of editors who, scissors in hand, eagerly scanned exchanges, was soon known throughout the nation. As early as 1833, at least twenty-nine and probably far more newspapers clipped and printed Seba Smith's Jack Downing letters in cities as distant from Portland, Maine, as Cincinnati, Louisville, Philadelphia, and Washington, D. C.[20] As years passed the "contagion of our American exchange system," as Stedman called it, had spread even wider. B. P. Shillaber could proudly say in his preface to *Life and Sayings of Mrs. Partington* (New York: J. C. Derby, 1854): "Mrs. Partington . . . needs no introduction. In all parts of our land, and over the sea, her name is familiar as a household word." Eli Perkins boasted that a satirical letter of 1888 was "copied into thousands of newspapers, and . . . read by 10,000,000 people within a week," and that "it brought back bushels of letters *pro* and *con* to the writer, and among them letters from so great a man as James G. Blaine and the two presidential candidates, Cleveland and Harrison."[21]

The newspaper blessed with a witty paragrapher or amusing humorist could win national prominence. In the years before the War of the States, Prentice's paragraphs, habitually copied everywhere, made *The Louisville Journal* known in every section,[22] and when Halpine became a humorist connected with *The New York Leader,* "the circulation of the paper increased enormously, and it

[19] All of the publications mentioned in footnote 16 and in the paragraph to which it refers furnished exchange material to two or more humorous columns.

[20] M. A. Wyman, *Two American Pioneers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927), pp. 235-236.

[21] *Op. cit.,* p. 132.

[22] Derby, *Fifty Years among Authors, Books and Publishers* (New York, 1886), pp. 419-420.

became a political power."[23] The humorist as well as the newspaper gained national prominence. In 1879, Burdette's sketch, "The Brakeman at Church," was published in a paper in the little town of Burlington, Iowa. "Its popularity was immediate, and after its publication in the newspaper letter, it was republished . . . as a pamphlet, and was distributed by tens of thousands. It was copied by every newspaper of more than the slightest importance in the country . . . and few of the reading public of that generation but had an intimate knowledge of the 'Brakeman at Church.' "[24] After a few such hits, according to the city editor of the paper, *The Burlington Hawk-Eye* "came to be read not only within the limits of Burlington and Iowa as in the past, but had its circle of readers in practically every state in the Union."[25] While Burdette, soon known as "The Hawk-Eye Man," thus became famous, Bailey, "The Danbury News Man," built up a circulation of forty thousand for the paper employing him, though it was published in a little town in Connecticut.[26] Other newspapers prospered. In the words of H. C. Lukens:

> The *Danbury News* and *Detroit Free Press* became household gods that usurped the thrones of Farmers' Almanacs, and toppled them from their ivy-thatched 'high eminence'. . . . After 1876 much was heard of such special family visitors, like the *Oil City Derrick,* on which Robert Wesley Creswell . . . won his editorial, humorous spurs; of the *Burlington* (Iowa) *Hawkeye,* Robert J. Burdette's auriferous fun mine; of the Yonkers *Gazette;* Cincinnati *Breakfast Table,* long the profitable mirthy quarry of E. P. Brown; of *Peck's Sun,* a Milwaukee luminary of the *Virginia City Enterprise,* identified with "Dan De Quille" (pseudonym of W. W. Wright) and Nevada's ripples of silvered merit. . . .[27]

IV

Perhaps there was much logic in the belief of Hudson that one important reason why comic journals had very hard sledding lay

[23] *National Cyclopedia of American Biography* (New York: James T. White & Co., 1929), VI, 27.

[24] C. J. Burdette, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 114.

[26] *National Cyclopedia of American Biography* (New York, 1929), VI, 28. For additional testimony, see J. L. Ford's article in *Munsey's Magazine,* XXV, 488 (July, 1901), and Slason Thompson's *Life of Eugene Field* (New York and London: D. Appleton & Company, 1927), pp. 60-61.

[27] "American Literary Comedians," *Harper's Magazine,* LXXX, 791-792 (April, 1890). Only a portion of the list given by Lukens is reproduced.

in the fact that Americans were supplied with humor by newspapers. Yet in addition to newspapers, periodicals which published humorous materials, in spite of hardships and failures, joined other forces in lifting humor to popularity. Treating the magazines of years between 1825 and 1850, Mr. Frank Luther Mott notes: "Humor is far more prominent in American periodical literature than it had ever been before; all except the most serious now have their 'Fun Jottings' or 'Joke Corner,' or something analogous."[28] Lewis Gaylord Clark, the editor of *The Knickerbocker,* printed the work of Fred S. Cozzens, Charles Godfrey Leland, "Phoenix," and many another humorous writer in a comic department which, by 1853, occupied a third of the magazine.[29] *The Southern Literary Messenger* printed the work of Baldwin and Bagby. *Harper's Magazine,* after 1851, in its Editor's Drawer, and *Scribner's Monthly,* after its start in 1870, used typical contemporary humor. Shaw, creator of Josh Billings, wrote humor of the type that had made him famous over the signature of Uncle Esek in *The Century.*

The most important periodicals, however, from the standpoint of humorists who profited by popularity, were the comic journals. To be sure many of these died at a tender age, after driving editors to despair, and there was some naturalness in the ending of Newell's burlesque novel, *The Cloven Foot* (1870), which showed a comic journal editor attempting to hang himself. Nevertheless, whether they survived long or not, comic periodicals were so numerous that Newell, in the novel mentioned, could tell with some accuracy of an undertaker displaying a graveyard full of "projectors of American *Punches.*" A list of such publications,[30] though still far from complete, shows that at least 116 such periodicals appeared between 1800 and 1900.

[28] *A History of American Magazines, 1741-1850* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1930), p. 424.

[29] *Ibid.,* pp. 609-610.

[30] Mr. Franklin J. Meine and the writer are attempting to compile a complete list. The most helpful sources have been J. Brander Mathews' "The Comic Periodical Literature of the United States," *The American Bibliopolist,* VII, 199-201 (August, 1875); L. W. Kingman's "The Comic Periodicals of America," *The American Bibliopolist,* VII, 262-265 (December, 1875); Frank Luther Mott, *op. cit.;* and Ernest L. Hancock's "The Passing of the American Comic," *The Bookman,* XXII, 78-84 (September, 1905). The lists given in these works, however, are quite incomplete, and the *Union List* offers little help. It has been necessary to look for a large share of material in articles and books about the humorists and in comic journals which mentioned exchanges or gloated over rival publications which passed away.

Most of them lived only a short time—*The Wasp,* published in New York, two years (1802-1803); *The Red Book,* Baltimore, two years (1819-1821); *The Galaxy of Comicalities,* Philadelphia, from October 2, 1833 to July 5, 1834; *The Picayune,* New York, eleven years (1847-1858); *The City Budget,* New York, a year or less (1853-1854); *The Knapsack,* Philadelphia, October 24 to November 4, 1865; *Texas Siftings,* Austin, Texas, probably no more than fifteen years (1882-1897?) in spite of its popularity; *The Fat Contributor's Saturday Night,* Cincinnati, about eleven years (1872-1882)—these were fairly typical. "It's a funny thing, certainly," said *Yankee Doodle,* "that a Humorous Newspaper has concluded its second volume in the United States."[31]

But despite the high mortality rate, which, after all, was hardly higher than that of other American periodicals, humorous publications appeared during every part of the century, and there is some evidence that a number achieved rather remarkable popularity. *Yankee Doodle,* for example, published two *Pictorial Yankee Doodles* in 1847 for free distribution to subscribers, and of each of these 100,000 were printed.[32] *John Donkey,* Philadelphia (Jan. 1, 1848-July 15, 1848), though it lived less than a year, had at one time a circulation of 12,000.[33] This compares fairly well with the most popular magazines of the day, *Graham's* (40,000), and *Godey's* (150,000); it surpasses *The Southern Literary Messenger,* whose subscribers numbered 5,500 in its prosperous days under Poe, *The Knickerbocker* (5,000), and dozens of others.[34] *The Picayune* had at one time a circulation of 35,000,[35] although the number fell to 6,500 in 1853.[36] At the same time, *The Reveille* (1853-1854?) was issuing 2,800 copies of each number,[37] and *The Pick* (1853-1854?) was boasting that it sold 24,000 copies of its first number, 27,000 of its second, and 30,000 of its third.[38] Less than a year after its start, the editor of *The Pick* was proclaiming: "We started with $5 and we have made a property that we would not sell tomorrow for

[31] Preface to Vol. II (1847).

[32] Advertisements in *Yankee Doodle* in most of the issues of 1847.

[33] Albert H. Smyth, *Philadelphia Magazines and their Contributors* (Philadelphia, 1892), p. 235.

[34] F. L. Mott, *op. cit.*

[35] *The Pick,* II, 1, March 12, 1853.

[36] *Ibid.,* Feb. 5, 1853.

[37] *Ibid.,* Dec. 11, 1852.

[38] *Ibid.,* Jan. 1, 1853.

$50,000."[39] And it is probable that, in the period before the war, *The Carpet-Bag,* Boston (1851-1853), and *Vanity Fair,* New York (December 31, 1859-July 4, 1863), on which definite figures are not available, surpassed most of these.

Though fewer figures are recorded, those which can be discovered indicate that in the years after the war, comic publications reached even greater numbers. *Peck's Sun,* in 1882, had a circulation of 20,000 and was "rapidly increasing."[40] Opie Read's *Arkansas Traveler* (1883) reached a circulation of 60,000.[41] In 1887, *Texas Siftings* had a circulation which had "long exceeded 100,000 copies each issue," and a popularity which was international.[42] *Puck* (March, 1877-September, 1918), *Judge* (1881-) and *Life* (1883-) were probably even more popular. In the words of J. L. Ford, "It is impossible to estimate the importance of these comic journals in the development and encouragement of American humor. They were read and widely quoted, and they popularized humor to such an extent that many other periodicals found it advisable to maintain departments consisting entirely of original humorous matter."[43]

V

The writings of humorists were published in books as well as magazines, and again there is evidence of mounting popularity which prepared the way for Mark Twain and his contemporaries. *Georgia Scenes* (1835) had by 1894 passed through twelve editions, and a writer in 1874 held it had had a larger circulation than any other Southern book.[44] According to the publisher, when Shillaber's *Life and Sayings of Mrs. Partington* appeared in 1854, at least 50,000 copies, including a first edition of 20,000, were sold.[45] Miriam Berry Whitcher's *Widow Bedott Papers,* after increasing the circulation of the magazine in which they first appeared, in 1855 sold "something over 100,000 copies."[46] By 1855, *Major Jones's Court-*

[39] *Loc. cit.*

[40] Will M. Clemens, *Famous Funny Fellows* (New York, 1883), p. 134.

[41] W. C. Vischer, "Opie Read," in *Library of Southern Literature* (New Orleans: Martin and Hoyt Co., 1909), X, 4358.

[42] *The Journalist, a Pictorial Souvenir* (New York: Allan Forman, 1887), p. 101.

[43] "Century of American Humor," *Munsey's Magazine,* XXV, 490 (July, 1901).

[44] Maximilian La Borde, *History of South Carolina College* (Charleston, 1874), p. 462.

[45] Derby, *op. cit.,* pp. 407-411. [46] *Ibid.,* pp. 413-416.

ship, first issued in 1844, had run through thirteen editions in the United States.[47] And before Ward had achieved the pinnacle of his popularity, when his first book came off the presses in 1862, "40,000 copies were sold outright, an enormous edition for the time."[48] Huntley's *Spoopendyke,* now completely forgotten, appeared in 1881, and "over 300,000 copies of the work were manufactured and disposed of within three months after its first appearance." Later several revised and enlarged editions were printed.[49] Then, in 1888, Belford, Clarke & Company, in an edition of Nye's *Baled Hay,* proudly told of the following remarkable sales of the books by Peck:

How Private George W. Peck Put Down the Rebellion	40th thousand
Peck's Bad Boy and His Pa	750th thousand
Peck's Bad Boy and His Pa, No. 2	200th thousand
Peck's Sunshine	125th thousand
Peck's Fun	125th thousand
Peck's Boss Book	50th thousand

Doubtless some allowance should be made for a publisher's enthusiasm here, but since, by now, train butchers were purveying paper editions while bookstores all over the country offered other editions, and since Peck was undoubtedly tremendously popular, the optimistic figures should not be discounted a great deal. Burdette, Bailey, and Nye were probably about as popular.

By the time this announcement was made, humorists were compiling and selling annually almanacs which, like their books, had remarkable sales. Of course, almanacs were not new things; Franklin and others had published them in colonial times; *The Crockett Almanacs* (1835-1853?) had had a large sale several years after the death of Davy Crockett, and before 1842, Robert H. Elton "had gained some little notoriety for his comic almanacks . . . made up of reproductions of Cruikshank's and Seymour's designs, interspersed with humorous sketches."[50] In the seventies, eighties, and

[47] *Eclectic Magazine,* XXXV, 269 (June, 1855).

[48] Don C. Seitz, *Artemus Ward* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1919), p. 119. See also Derby, *op. cit.,* p. 242.

[49] Will M. Clemens, *op. cit.,* p. 201.

[50] L. W. Kingman, *op. cit.,* p. 262.

nineties, the tradition of the comic almanac was revived. In 1870, when Josh Billings published his first *Farmer's Alminax,* it sold 90,000 copies; the following year 127,000 copies appeared, and in 1872, some 100,000 were sold. The publication ran through ten years, during each of which more than 50,000 copies were sold.[51] Carl Pretzel of Chicago published an almanac which had "a large and ready sale" during the late seventies and early eighties,[52] and *The Danbury News Man's Almanac* (1873) was "as successful as his volumes of sketches."[53]

In addition to the works of the humorists which they themselves published, there were humorous anthologies. As early as 1845, Porter's famous *Big Bear of Arkansas* collection appeared, to be followed by another collection by the same author. Sam Slick's two anthologies, each in three volumes, were issued in both England and America. In the sixties, three volumes of *Yankee Drolleries* were compiled by George Augustus Sala. Towards the end of the century, when Eli Perkins and Mark Twain joined the ranks of anthologists, the number increased. *American Humorists,* edited by the Rev. H. R. Haweis in 1883, had a large sale, though one of many such books. At least 32 collections or new editions of collections appeared during the years 1884-1890,[54] and at least 28 appeared between 1890 and 1894.[55] All of these publications stimulated interest and indicated the popularity of the humor of American writers.

VI

The literary comedians did not, however, have to depend entirely upon printed works as a medium for spreading their fame. Like motion picture actors and actresses of today, who make "appearances in person" before enthusiastic audiences, humorists went into every part of the land and appeared on lecture platforms.

Started in 1825 as a part of the lyceum system, the popular lec-

[51] Francis S. Smith, *Life and Adventures of Josh Billings* (New York: G. W. Carleton & Co., 1883), pp. 41-44. For additional testimony, see *National Cyclopedia of American Biography* (New York, 1929), VI, 29, and Derby, *op. cit.,* p. 243. Though the figures are not precisely the same, there is essential agreement to the effect that early issues sold more than 100,000.

[52] Will M. Clemens, *op. cit.,* pp. 162-163.

[53] *National Cyclopedia of American Biography,* VI, 28.

[54] *The American Catalogue 1884-1890* (New York: Publishers' Weekly, 1891).

[55] *The American Catalogue 1890-1894* (New York: Publishers' Weekly, 1895).

ture, which before the war had "spread throughout the country from Boston to Detroit and Maine to Florida" and which after the war was exploited by such enterprising leaders as Williams, Pond, and Redpath, proved a boon to many humorists.[56] In 1870, an Englishman said:[57]

> America is a lecture-hall on a very extensive scale. The rostrum extends in a straight line from Boston, through New York and Philadelphia, to Washington. There are raised seats on the first tier in the Alleghanies, and gallery accommodations on the top of the Rocky Mountains. . . . The voice of the lecturer is never silent in the United States.

The Englishman, E. P. Hingston, was well acquainted with the American situation, for he had managed many of the appearances on the platform of the first important humorist of America to acquire money and fame by giving comic lectures, Artemus Ward. Ward started his career in the field in 1861, taking a hint from Barnum, who had overcome scruples of country folk visiting the theater in his museum by calling it "The Moral Lecture-Room," and advertising his speech as a "Moral Lecture."[58] Starting modestly by appearing in a few New England towns, the lecturer traveled over widening territory.[59] In 1861 he visited New York, Paterson, Corning, Elmira, and other towns and cities. Thereafter "dates followed in thick order," dates arranged with "bureaus and local committees" for appearances at fixed pay. In 1862 he appeared not only on Eastern platforms but also in halls in Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Memphis. The following year, on the bustling frontier of the Far West, he entertained the miners and settlers of California, Texas, Utah, and Nevada. In 1864, he appeared during a period of two months in nightly lectures in New York, had a period of two crowded weeks in Boston, and visited other cities in the United States and in Canada. After another successful season in 1865, he

[56] For details on the early history of the lyceum, consult G. W. Cooke's *Introduction to The Dial* (Cleveland, 1902), I, 42-43, and *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1881), pp. 256-257. For the later growth of the lyceum system, see John S. Noffsinger, *Correspondence Schools, Lyceums, Chautauquas* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), pp. 99-105.

[57] E. P. Hingston, *The Genial Showman* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1870), p. 42.

[58] *Ibid.*, p. 43.

[59] Don Seitz, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-222. This is the source for all of the material on Ward the lecturer given here.

went, in 1866, to England, where he had a notable success which not only augmented his fortunes but also caused Americans to look more proudly upon native humorists. And through the years, there was a rather steady increase both in receipts and in the number attending his lectures.

Other lecturers followed Ward into a field which offered returns of from fifty dollars to three hundred dollars for each appearance. Josh Billings began to appear on the platform in 1863, and thereafter, for at least twenty successive seasons, he

> . . . read the lecture in every town on this continent that has 20,000 people, and in hundreds that have not got 1,000 in them; read it in every town in Texas and California, and in all the Canadian towns, and then down South, from Baltimore to Palatka, Florida, and still across to Memphis, and then into New Orleans, reading each season from fifty to over a hundred nights.[60]

In 1866, Locke (Nasby) began a career as a lecturer which lasted at least five years.[61] Meanwhile A. Minor Griswold had started, in 1865, activity as a lecturer which continued through eighteen years,[62] and which carried him as far as the Puget Sound.[63] Other humorists who had successful lecturing careers included Richard Malcolm Johnston,[64] George W. Peck, J. M. Bailey, Eli Perkins, Bill Arp, Benjamin P. Shillaber (Mrs. Partington),[65] William L. Visscher,[66] Major Burbank,[67] Dr. George W. Bagby,[68] Phillips Thompson,[69] Rufus Griswold,[70] Eugene Field,[71] and others.

Among the others were Mark Twain, whose very popular early

[60] F. S. Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-55. See also C. B. Burdette, *op. cit.*, p. 134, and *National Cyclopedia of American Biography*, VI, 29.

[61] Interview in *The Newark Courier*, November 19, 1871.

[62] *National Cyclopedia of American Biography*, VI, 29.

[63] W. L. Visscher, *Ten Wise Men and Some More* (Chicago, 1908), p. 54.

[64] *National Cyclopedia of American Biography*, VI, 32.

[65] *Kings of the Platform and Pulpit*, ed. Eli Perkins (Chicago: Bedford-Clarke Co., 1890), pp. 275, 239, 194, 437, 425.

[66] *Ten Wise Men and Some More*, p. 100.

[67] James Barr, *The Humour of America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), p. 441.

[68] J. L. King, *Dr. George William Bagby* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927), pp. 172-175.

[69] *American Punch*, I, 80, July, 1879.

[70] Will M. Clemens, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

[71] C. H. Dennis, *Eugene Field's Creative Years* (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, 1924), p. 241.

works were preceded and followed by almost equally popular lectures, and Robert J. Burdette. Burdette was exceedingly successful from the beginning of his career in 1876 until the end of the century. In addition to presenting "The Rise and Fall of the Moustache," his greatest success, nearly five thousand times, he gave the following comic lectures frequently: "Home," "The Pilgrimage of the Funny Man," "Advice to a Young Man," "Wild Gourds," "Woman With the Broom," "Dimity Government," "Sawing Wood," "Twice Told Tales," "Handles," and Rainbow Chasers"; and he appeared in every corner of the nation.[72]

Thus the humor of the stage and the humor of politics brought popularity to the American jesters of the nineteenth century, and numerous publications—newspapers, magazines, comic journals, books, almanacs—and lectures as well helped carry the native humor to a growing number of people.

VII

How, near the end of the century, various forces helped a humorist to fame is illustrated in the story of the growth of the popularity of Bill Nye (1850-1896). In 1882, a fortunate coupling of humor with politics helped Nye gain attention when, upon being appointed postmaster of Laramie, he wrote a letter to the postmaster general "extending his thanks" and proclaiming: "I look upon the appointment as a great triumph of eternal truth over error and wrong . . . one of the epochs . . . in the Nation's onward march toward political purity and perfection." The amusing letter was widely copied; it was commented upon in distant England by *The London Daily News.* A similar letter in which Nye humorously told the President of his resignation in 1883 was also copied,[73] almost as widely as Nye humorously asserted—"from Japan to South Africa, and from Beersheba to a given point."[74] Later open letters of advice to Cleveland when he entered the White House and political touches in many comic anecdotes and essays continued his appeal to an audience interested in politics.

Newspapers, periodicals, and comic journals augmented Nye's

[72] For details, see C. B. Burdette, *op. cit.,* pp. 121-132.

[73] F. W. Nye, *Bill Nye: His Own Life Story* (New York: Century, 1926), pp. 98-108. The letters were reprinted in *Remarks.*

[74] *National Cyclopedia of American Biography,* VI, 25.

fame. As early as 1876, a squib in *The Laramie Sentinel* was quoted in *The St. Paul Pioneer Press,* and soon after, when he became a contributor to *The Denver Tribune,* he was quoted by "papers in Omaha and Salt Lake, *The Detroit Press, Texas Siftings, Peck's Sun,* and many others." Then, in 1881, *The Boomerang* was started, a daily paper with a local circulation of 250, and, in addition, *The Weekly Boomerang,* wherein a whole page of Nye's humor was included. The weekly, like *The Hawk-Eye* and *The Danbury News,* served as a humorous periodical, and although the daily steadily lost money, the weekly, selling in "all parts of the Union," made a good profit; when Nye left the paper, it "soon found its level as a small-town daily."[75]

Before he left Laramie, however, the small town's humorist had been discovered by exchanges. By 1882, said Will M. Clemens, he was widely quoted . . . perhaps more extensively copied than any other humorist of the day."[76] In 1890, Landon said: "Every newspaper in the English language is now filled with his writings,"[77] slightly exaggerating, one fears, but little more enthusiastic than Mark Twain, who said in 1888, "His contributions to the press have given him a reputation commensurate with the country."[78]

But by 1890, Nye had become associated with papers which had wider fame than his Laramie publication. In 1885, he had made arrangements for weekly letters with *The Boston Globe,* and in 1887, he had become associated with *The New York World,* then eagerly hiring contributors who would boom the paper's large circulation. Prior to 1887, some of the writer's works were sold to a list of newspapers, though they were not syndicated until after 1891, when the American Press Association sent out his writings to "one of the leading newspapers in practically all of the leading cities."[79] By 1893, English papers had begun to purchase the letters, and *The London Sketch* of October 1, 1893, said:

. . . Mr. Nye has become a power in the land; the President himself is not more caricatured. His sayings are quoted everywhere. There is hardly a town with a Sunday paper that does not print his latest column.

[75] F. W. Nye, *op. cit.,* pp. 45-95.

[76] W. M. Clemens, *op. cit.,* p. 117.

[77] *Kings of the Platform and Pulpit,* p. 306.

[78] *Mark Twain's Library of Humor* (New York: Charles L. Webster & Company, 1888), p. 383.

[79] F. W. Nye, letter to the writer, February 19, 1930.

At the time of Nye's death in 1896, "about 70 leading newspapers" were using the weekly syndicated article, and later the head of the Press Association, Orlando Smith, asserted that "the success of the Association had been largely built upon the Nye articles and . . . Bill Nye was the most widely read and highly paid writer in the United States."[80]

Magazines as well as newspapers used Nye's writings—*The Century, The Cosmopolitan, The Ladies' Home Journal, Once a Week, Good Roads, The Ingleside, The Northwestern Miller,* and the comic periodical, *Puck*. In 1891, he published an *Almanac*.

Furthermore, Nye's lectures in the years between 1883 and 1895 acquainted thousands of people with his comic personality.[81] Adopting the gloomy method of delivery affected by Ward and most humorous lecturers, on the platform always he assumed a "solemnity of look and sepulchral voice when he was saying something he knew would be humorous. At such times he had a queer sort of cross-eyed glint leftward."[82] He began his career by appearing alone. Later, however, during his most successful seasons (1888-1890), he appeared with Riley, who had had some experience in the work before this.[83] With little Riley serving as a foil for the tall nonsensical Nye, the two entertained thousands in scores of cities and hamlets and reaped large returns for the Pond Lyceum Bureau. Capacity crowds greeted them everywhere, and in Wyoming the legislature adjourned to welcome Nye. Then, after, a break-up with Riley, Nye, under the management of H. B. Thearle or the Redpath Lyceum Bureau, and accompanied at different times by W. L. Visscher, Alfred P. Burbank, William Hawley Smith, and Bert Poole, continued lecture work, at least one trip carrying him to California.

In 1891, Nye invaded successfully still another field which had been prepared for humorous works—the field of the drama. His

[80] *Ibid.*

[81] *Bill Nye: His Own Life Story,* pp. 128-397, to which I am chiefly indebted, gives a detailed account of Nye as a lecturer.

[82] Visscher, *Ten Wise Men. . . ,* p. 96.

[83] Marcus Dickey, *The Maturity of James Whitcomb Riley* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1922), pp. 182-184. For details concerning the lecture trips of the pair, see pp. 234-256. Landon has preserved a record of an entire Nye-Riley appearance in *Kings of the Platform and Pulpit,* pp. 315-325.

play, *The Cadi,* full of his typical humor, had a run of 125 nights in the Union Square Theater.

The story of Nye's activities as a journalist, as a lecturer, and as a playwright indicates that, like many an earlier and many a contemporary humorist, he built up a remarkably large following. Details concerning the publication of Nye's books seem to offer additional evidence. In 1882, Will Clemens noted that Nye's first book "had a tremendous sale,"[84] and apparently other volumes were equally successful. *Boomerang, Forty Liars,* and *Baled Hay,* Nye's first three books, according to a conservative estimate of Nye's son, probably sold at least 100,000 copies apiece,[85] and five other works, judging on the basis of the number of editions and Nye's position, must have been equally successful. *Nye's History of the United States* went through eight editions during the first year, and after the plates were sold as late as 1905 to Thompson and Thomas, the company, according to one of the partners, sold 250,000 copies in thirteen years.[86] Nye's son estimates that at least 500,000 copies of the history were sold, and *Remarks* was a close second.[87]

All of these books, with the exception of the history, were sold not only in book stores but also, in paper-covered editions, at newsstands and on trains. The following table, perhaps incomplete, shows the number of editions (including paper-covered)—probably large editions—through which important works passed during Nye's lifetime:

Book	*Number of Editions*
Bill Nye and Boomerang (1881)	10
Forty Liars and Other Lies (1882)	10
Baled Hay (1884)	10
Blossom Rock (pirated) (1885)	1
Remarks (1887)	7
Chestnuts (1887)	8
Cordwood (pirated) (1887)	1
Thinks (also called Sparks) (1888)	6
Railway Guide (1888)	6
History of the United States (1894)	10

[84] *Op. cit.,* p. 117.

[85] Letter to the writer, February 19, 1930. [86] *Loc. cit.*

[87] *Loc. cit.* My estimate on the history would be 200,000 higher. It went through eight large editions in 1894 alone.

These figures offer interesting evidence that the last of the old school of American humorists, after becoming active in a time when other comedians had cultivated a large public for humorous works, achieved extraordinary popularity. And Nye's career was more typically that of a humorist of the century than, at first glance, one would be inclined to suspect.

Thus when Nye, his predecessors, and his contemporaries practiced and preached simplicity and homeliness of language in a day of grandiloquence, realism in thought and in fiction in a day of pseudo-romantic writing, the practical men (including a genius, Mark Twain) who somehow stumbled into writing were assured of a large and attentive audience. And the history of American literature testifies that at the end of the century salutary results had already begun to appear.